

Off-year elections boost Democratic comeback

Try as I might, there simply was no way I could interpret last week's off-year elections as a mere standoff or mixed bag, let alone a Republican victory. No, the GOP fared disappointingly overall, and the Democrats have every right to claim, in National Chairman Robert Strauss' words, that the party is "back on the track."

The biggest Democratic prize captured was the election of Brendan Byrne as New Jersey governor. Byrne, a former judge and political neophyte, had several things going for him in a landslide (66 per cent) victory which also brought Democratic control to both houses of the state legislature for only the third time this century.

john vihstadt
different drummer

Byrne's Republican opponent, Charles Sandman, an abrasive ultraconservative Congressman from the rural southern part of the state, practically handed a potentially winnable gubernatorial election to the Democrats. The reactionary representative defeated progressive GOP Gov. William Cahill in a bitter June primary, largely on wild charges that the governor tolerated corruption and fraud in the statehouse at Trenton. In the end, Sandman himself was linked to shady financial dealings.

Upon winning the primary, Sandman refused a

rapprochement with Republican moderates and liberals, spurned Cahill's endorsement of him and proceeded to throw complete control of the state GOP apparatus into conservative hands. He thus alienated many Republicans and provoked an irreparable party split, something a minority party simply cannot afford.



"Pat, it's raining on my parade!"

Also, the Republican nominee's unyieldingly abid right-wing platform on the campaign trail turned off crucial independent voters. Such a simplistic line, condemning crime, corruption, bussing, welfare and taxes without any hint of plausible solutions or alternatives) was bound to fail in a heavily populated, highly unionized urban industrial state such as New Jersey. As a result, Sandman gave the Democratic nominee carte blanche to pursue the moderate, middle-of-the-road course whereby most of the votes are won.

Their win in the Garden State gave the Democrats a total of 32 of the 50 states, their highest number since 1958, and a complete reversal of the 32-18 balance in favor of the GOP in 1969.

Virginia offered slightly more solace for the Republicans, as Mills Godwin Jr., the Democratic governor from 1966 to 1970, made a comeback and this time won as a Republican.

Since being seized last year by a militant McGovernite faction, the once-dominant state Democratic party has been in such a shamble that for the first time in history it put up no candidate. Instead, the party gave its tacit backing to ultraliberal Lieutenant Gov. Henry Howell, a Democrat who ran as an Independent rather than risk certain defeat under the Democratic banner.

Still, Godwin's victory margin—14,000 votes, or 1.4% out of over a million cast—was painfully small in a state which twelve months ago went for President Nixon with 70% of the votes. And even as Godwin held on to the governorship for the Republicans (GOP Gov. Linwood Holton was barred by law from succeeding himself), his party was losing five seats in the lower house of the state legislature.

Next week: How did the cities vote?

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